

RAISED SENATE BILL NO. 1196

GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

AN ACT CONCERNING THE CONVEYANCE OF CERTAIN PARCELS OF STATE LAND

Testimony Submitted by Dr. Melvin Woody, Chairman, Connecticut River Gateway Commission

March 21, 2011

My name is Melvin Woody. I am the chairman of the Gateway Commission, which administers the Gateway Conservation Zone established in 1973 by the vote of this legislature and the vote of town meetings in the eight towns in the lower Connecticut River estuary. I am here to testify against the inclusion of section 14 in S.B. 1196.

This is the third time that the transfer described in Section 14 has come before this committee. In 2009, Governor Rell refused to sign the whole bill. In 2010, exactly the same proposal as you see before you was removed from the bill in response to objections by the DEP, the Gateway Commission and others. Because the proposal has not changed, despite the Gateway Commission's efforts, everything I said in objection last year still applies, so I will include last year's objections in my written testimony. I would like to stress three points about that statement.

That testimony reviews the reasons the legislature and towns established the Conservation Zone. I was on the committee that designed the Zone in 1973 and have served on the Gateway Commission ever since. I want to stress that the the Zone was not created in order to oppose development, but to guide it – lest hap-hazard, piecemeal development spoil one of the state's most valuable resources, the only unspoiled major river estuary on the Eastern seaboard. which The Nature Conservancy calls one of the last great places on earth.

Second, we oppose section 14 as it stands as of today. As in 2010, we have been told about ambitious plans for the site. But *no such plans are spelled out in the bill!* As

it stands, the bill is a blank check. It conveys into private ownership a parcel purchased by the state for the explicit purpose of conservation as open space. And no wonder so! This parcel is one of the most important to the public in the entire Conservation Zone. The legislature did not establish the Conservation Zone merely for the sake of the eight towns that collaborate in maintaining it. It proclaimed that the lower Connecticut valley is a precious resource for the entire state and the nation. There are only a five or six places where the non-boating public can enjoy the beauty of the valley. The view from the Goodspeed Opera House and the swinging bridge between East Haddam and Haddam is one of those spots – and the site in question is what you see from the opera house and its picnic grounds, from the Gelston House and as you head west on the bridge. It is one of the prime tourist sites in the state and therefore especially important to preserve.

Third, and nevertheless, within a month of the removal of this proposal from last year's conveyance bill, we began negotiating with the parties interested in this proposal in search of a comprehensive solution that might satisfy the most salient interests of the Conservation Zone, the DEP, the towns of Haddam and East Haddam, which has a major interest in what happens to that site and, last, the partnership that has proposed this transfer. Those discussions have issued in a long overdue planning effort to design a new village zone for the Tylerville district of Haddam, which is now zoned industrial. I have asked J. H. Torrance Downes, our staff planner, to describe those negotiations because until they issue in a more definite plan, the Gateway Commission must oppose this transfer on behalf of its member towns and the public at large. A comprehensive solution will have to include a conservation easement that will adequately protect the viewscape from the river, the bridge and East Haddam.

Any proposal that does not do so risks the setting a precedent that will endanger all efforts of the state, The Nature Conservancy and local land trusts to acquire conservation land and scenic easements. That was one of the DEP's chief objections to this transfer last year. If people cannot trust the state to honor its contracts and obligations, they are not likely to entrust their property to the state's open space program. We recognize that Section 14 proposes to trade the land by the river for an even larger, 87 acre tract of highlands adjacent to Cockaponsett State Park. At 16,000 acres Cockaponset Park is already the second largest of Connecticut's state parks. Land along its borders isn't nearly as scarce or precious as riverside lands available to the public. (Although Section 14 does also include a riverside parcel of 2.7 acres at the end of the Goodspeed Parking Lot, so far as we can discover, that passage is obsolete and that parcel is no longer included in the trade.) For reasons stated above, the Gateway Commission is convinced that because of its peculiarly strategic location, the land overlooking the river is of far greater value to the public than the larger parcel offered in exchange.

However, sensible of the interests of its member towns, the Gateway Commission has spent recent months exploring the possibility of a solution that would satisfy the primary interests of both the Conservation Zone and the towns of Haddam and East Haddam and that might also be acceptable to the DEP. Not all of the land in question is visible from the river. It may be possible to satisfy the conservation purposes of the Gateway Conservation Zone by a scenic easement and still have room for some commercial development consistent with "the traditional riverway scene." That is the solution we have been exploring with the town and the Riverhouse Partnership. We ask

that you not prejudice those negotiations prematurely by approving this transfer while so many pertinent questions remain unsettled.

With that, I conclude my 2011 explanation of the Connecticut River Gateway's opposition to the inclusion of Section 14 in this year's conveyance bill. My 2010 testimony follows. As I said to begin with, since Section 14 is exactly the same as Section 19 of last year's conveyance bill, last year's comments still applies and I hope you will regard them as an integral part of this year's testimony on behalf of the Gateway Commission.

Thank you for your attention. Mr. Downes and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have after his testimony.